

HE SPENT HIS LIFE AIDING
BLIND READERS

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MARY FABYAN WINDEATT

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ON April 26 of this year, Joseph M. Stadelman, S.J., went to his heavenly reward. A good many people knew Father Stadelman, and mourned his passing, but it is the Catholic blind of this country who are going to miss him most. Since 1900 he had been working for these afflicted ones of God, encouraging them by personal contact as well as in another way that few people know. For Father Stadelman was the founder of the Xavier Free Publication Society for the Blind, an organization in New York City which is busy, year in and year out, publishing Catholic books and a magazine in Braille and mailing these without charge to blind persons throughout the United States.

Father Stadelman, born in Guebwiller, Alsace, on June 4, 1858, came to America as a boy, and entered the Society of Jesus at West Park, N. Y., when he was nineteen years old. He was ordained on August 25, 1889, when he was thirty-one, subsequently taking up teaching and parish duties at the College and Church of St. Francis Xavier in New York City. One of Father Stadelman's chief interests at this period was the spiritual care of the deaf-mutes in the metropolitan area. He learned the sign language (an unusual feat at the time for a priest), and had great success with preaching in this medium to his hard-of-hearing flock. It was difficult work, one requiring great patience, to minister to the deaf-mutes, but Father Stadelman's heart was in his labors. Unknown, except to immediate associates, he worked quietly away at his chosen task and had the happiness of knowing he was being of help to those who otherwise might have drifted from the Church.

While Father Stadelman was working for the deaf, he made the acquaintance of Margaret Coffey, a devout blind woman. Miss Coffey asked him what was being done for the Catholic blind in the matter of providing spiritual and doctrinal reading matter for them. Were there available any Catholic prayer books? Biography of saints? Devotional volumes of any sort? There were not, but presently Father Stadelman knew there would be a change. Private and governmental agencies had done quite a bit to provide reading matter in Braille for the American blind, but none of this was of a Catholic nature. Up until this time, the sightless had been quite neglected in the matter of spiritual reading in Braille. The whole field was new, but especially so to the Church.

The spirit of Louis Braille, the French Catholic of the last century who originated the raised printing system which bears his name, must have rejoiced when Father Stadelman entered the field of the blind apostolate. With very little help from any-

America, June 1, 1941
one, save from Margaret Coffey, who gave him her life savings, the Jesuit priest organized the Xavier Free Publication Society for the Blind. The arduous task of plating and printing the best Catholic works was welcomed by Father Stadelman, and little by little his library increased in size. By 1918, he and his helpers had published 700 books in the now obsolete New York Point Tactile Print. The subject matter included works on art, science, biography, history, poetry, fiction and travel, as well as ascetical, ethical, doctrinal and controversial works. The zealous Jesuit priest also inaugurated a magazine in New York Point, *The Catholic Transcript for the Blind*, a monthly religious and literary publication sent free of charge to any blind person applying for it. Herein were carried notices of each book the Society published, and from this small magazine the readers could make their choice of reading matter. A request sent to Father Stadelman, and the desired book was on its journey, postage free both ways, by reason of a special Federal provision.

Between the years of 1911 and 1918, the Society published, in cooperation with the Xavier Braille Society for the Blind, in Chicago, some 600 titles, as well as another magazine, *The Catholic Review*. The work was being blessed and maintained in a truly remarkable way. Letters came into the New York headquarters to tell just what happiness and encouragement Father Stadelman's labors were bringing to countless sightless souls. The Jesuit priest thanked God for the opportunity to become associated with a unique and wonderful work, little realizing that nearly everything he had accomplished was about to be rendered useless.

It was in 1918 that the authorities in charge of blind institutions throughout the country decided to drop the New York Point Tactile Print and to adopt, for universal use, the system known as Braille, Grade One and a Half. As a result, the hundreds of volumes the Society had published were now almost useless, among these being a set of seventeen monumental volumes of the Douai version of the Bible. The work of years was set at naught almost overnight, but the undaunted Father Stadelman was not a man to be downhearted for long. As soon as possible, he reorganized his work, learned the technicalities of the new system, installed the requisite machinery for printing, and with only the smallest of resources contained to guide the little Society on its precarious way. Since 1918, it has added hundreds of new titles to its library, and today there are more than 5,000 books available to blind readers.

Among the chief helpers of Father Stadelman during the last twenty years have been the members of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae. Scores of these Catholic women have undertaken to study Braille and to learn how to transcribe in their homes the necessary books. During the last two years they have put into Braille 121 titles, totaling over 300 volumes. The Alumnae of the Kenwood Academy of the Madames of the Sacred Heart, at Albany, N. Y., have also helped the Society by preparing 110 volumes

in Braille. Several books on Gregorian music and transcribed musical selections have been prepared by the Society, to enable blind Catholic musicians to qualify as church organists. The average cost for one volume of a Braille book is one hundred dollars. Thus, an average novel, which runs into three bulky volumes when transcribed, entails an expenditure of at least three hundred dollars. The great need at present is for funds to enable the Xavier Free Publication Society for the Blind to issue new titles for its readers. From humble sources have come the means which enabled Father Stadelman to carry on his great work for over forty years.

Besides putting the best Catholic books and pamphlets into Braille, the Society has engaged in another work, for a beginning has been made toward providing "talking books" for its members. A large percentage of the sightless find it impossible to read embossed books. The solution to this problem is the making of books on long-playing phonograph records. To that end there is now perfected the Talking Book Machine, built by the American Foundation for the Blind. Experiments have shown that a book of 60,000 words can be recorded on 12 double-face disc records, and can be manufactured at a cost which makes the recording of Talking Books a practical venture. To date, the Society has recorded the Four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The Kenwood Alumnae defrayed the cost of recording the Gospel of Saint John, as well as the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospels of Saint Matthew, Saint Mark and Saint Luke were recorded through the generosity of the Brooklyn Circle of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae. These records have been placed in all the lending libraries for the blind throughout the country and may be had for loan by any blind person free of charge.

A visitor to the Society, whose headquarters are at 136 West 97th Street, in New York City, will find a plain four-story brownstone house, similar to thousands of others that line the side streets of Manhattan. In the basement is the printing machinery that has turned out the thousands of Brailled volumes. Upstairs are the general offices, circulating library and bindery, from which go out each month several hundred volumes to sightless clients of the library all over the country.

Father Stadelman went to his reward last April, the last six years of his life being spent as an invalid from a severe foot infection. Unable to be on hand at the Society's headquarters as in the past, the eighty-two-year-old priest, nevertheless, continued to direct its work from Saint Ignatius Rectory, at 84th Street and Park Avenue. In his life time, the wonderful things he accomplished for the Catholic blind in this country received little or no publicity. The depression in the early '30's sorely affected the Society he pioneered, and it was necessary to make the monthly magazine a quarterly.

Father Stadelman is dead, but the great work he began in 1900 is still with us, a precious legacy to every Catholic interested in the extension of the Church.

ORIGINAL SIN: THAT IS OUR TROUBLE

THOMAS A. FOX, C.S.P.

IF man came from the jungle, as some still insist, it was because he thought his way out. He hewed his way out with an ax, which it took headwork to contrive. The evolutionist should be more explicit than to say simply that man came from the jungle. To come out of a jungle is to come into the clear; but with the exception of desert, there could have been no clearing on the face of the earth for man to come into. Though the fellow can be brutally stupid at times, he was hardly monkey enough to give up his watered shade for the burning sands of the desert. The only clearing which could tempt aboriginal man from his densely pillared roof had to be one that he made himself.

Considerably before he abandoned his sylvan simplicity, he must have peeled off his simian coat and chopped down a number of trees. Which means he had implements; which means he was using his head; which means he was an inordinately smart monkey; which means he was man, even back in the jungle. Pascal called man a thinking reed, suggesting in a flash all the pensive infirmity of our kind. We need not entirely deprive the evolutionist of his simian predilections. We might go part way with him and call man the monkey with an implement; intelligence lodged in flesh; the animal which uses its head.

Now, though headwork brought man into the clear, it has also entailed endless confusion. He is miserable to a great extent, and precisely because he *can* think. His history is one long nightmare of high-gear aspiration and low-gear fulfilment. He can think faster and farther than his feeble efforts will carry him. While he slogs along through the mud, he can contemplate the stars. His political history is one revolution after another. Repeatedly he strikes out in grandiose fashion to change his lot, and always in a forward direction; yet his net progress is snail-paced.

Of one who heaps his plate at table with more than he can eat we say that his eyes are too big for his stomach. Man's imagination is too big for his power of achievement. He can imagine a paradise, as his poets and philosophers have done over and over again in enchanting detail; and yet the earth of which he is master and forever tinkering with resembles more often a hell. He is forever at odds with his better judgment. When you contrast the stolid order of the brute kingdom with the hurly-burly of human affairs, you cannot but wonder what it is that makes man his own worst enemy; what lies at the bottom of his inhumanity to man?

The trouble seems to be with his desires. For one thing, he tends to exceed in satisfying them. The

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